



May 18, 2003

## **Reflections on the First People's Language and Culture Project**

I have always appreciated the wonders and culture of our Washington State Native Americans. When I was four years old, the Chief of the Yakama spoke briefly and directly to me, and I have never forgotten it. Most of my life I have respected and admired the cultural ties to nature and to the world as a whole. The native culture *IS* rich and has such depth!

Over the years I have accumulated a small collection of first peoples carvings and baskets. When I study the skillful use of materials, symbols and talents that created them it gives me great joy.

Martina Whelshula spoke to the State Board of Education about her experiences growing with, through and in spite of the education system, with struggles she so well articulated. Our Equity Committee had arranged a variety of sessions to educate members of the board on the issues and background for various groups. Having the groups speak for themselves, rather than through a report, has enriched us all. That first presentation highlighted the needs of the First Peoples to preserve their languages and culture in a truly genuine experience. It was outstanding.

I had been aware of some of these needs through programs of the Makah and others, and through Washington State Capitol Museum presentations. While traveling around the world in 1992-93 our family studied the indigenous peoples of countries through which we journeyed. Each group of peoples has had their struggles; and, difficulty protecting their languages and culture, too.

My first meeting as a new member of our SBE Professional Development and Certification Committee provided the opportunity to hear the First Peoples Language and Culture Committee's concerns and desires to have a certification for their native speakers. At that meeting we first explored the "Government to Government" arrangement that would need to be addressed and it all began to fall into place.

It was my great pleasure to represent our committee at the Swinomish meeting last summer that followed. I was able to listen to the many concerns and issues of tribes represented there. It

was an honor to have that interaction and to in some small way experience a piece of the culture that day. We worked through understanding of state requirements in law and rule that such an agreement would need to meet and why, while still honoring tribal autonomy. It was a good day. I believe that after that time it all became a matter of “word-smithing” and process to move forward and adopt our certification pilot project with the intent to create a working certification for tribal specialists to preserve by teaching and sharing their language and culture in our public schools. The First Peoples Language / Culture Committee stayed focused and pushed everything through to a culmination of tribal councils approval in the fall.

I know that this is the first government to government agreement of this type; and, Washington State has the opportunity to be a model for other states and the federal government to provide the same opportunities. It makes me and my colleagues proud; that we have the ability to “pioneer” this process in collaboration with the tribes.

Always, the first peoples spoke passionately and urgently about the need to prevent further loss of their language while their speakers are aging. And, of how important it is to move forward as quickly as possible. I feel so positive about this process. I look forward to each tribe working through the requirements of their tribal endorsements for qualified teachers of their language and culture. Who else may say what is required to know and to be able to do to teach the content of those important subjects?

The first Washington State Tribal Education Summit to “Leave No Indian Child Behind” held in March at the Quinalt Tribal Resort was a further opportunity to work with tribal members, administrators and the Language / Culture Committee. That session provided significant opportunity for further enrichment and understanding of need and urgency. So many people remembered the pain they and their ancestors had, due to harmful past policies; all the while, using the culture to help heal past hurts and to move forward, together; to change the future. It is exciting to be able to make good policy that will preserve that which has almost been lost.

The adoption of the First People's Language and Culture Certification Pilot Project was a highlight for all of us on the board. Policy making is not usually as immediately rewarding. Our meetings are rarely as colorful, nor as heartfelt and enriching. We believe that all our decisions are made for the “right” reasons, . . . for the kids. This time, it was an added bonus of history-making; life-altering for the future. Celebrations at that meeting and later at the Skokomish Longhouse will stay with me a very long time. I can hardly wait to visit the first program. I lift my hands upward; I have learned to show thankfulness for good and heartfelt work.

Yours,



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